

[The State of Higher Education: A Conversation with Allen Guelzo and Todd J. Williams](#)  
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Ben Best, Co-host

Welcome to *defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity

Ben Best, Co-host

All right, everyone. Welcome to Cairn Commons. I'm joined today by Dr. Todd Williams, president of Cairn University, and Dr. Allen Guelzo, senior research scholar in the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University and director of the James Madison Program's Initiative in Politics and Statesmanship. I'm Ben Best, your host.

Ben Best, Co-host

Gentlemen, welcome, and thank you for joining me today. I understand that your friendship goes back a number of years. Dr. Guelzo, I know you spoke at Dr. Williams' inauguration as the president of Cairn University. How long have you encouraged one another in your educational endeavors? Do you throw articles and books back and forth to one another? What does that relationship look like?

Dr. Todd Williams

It usually amounts to me needing perspective and going to Allen to ask him to give it to me. That's usually what it means.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

I try not to throw things at Todd, knowing that everybody else is throwing things at Todd. I thought, Let me not make the burden one greater.

Dr. Todd Williams

I think our paths first crossed in the late '90s with the Witherspoon work in Washington, DC. It was the first I think that we actually crossed paths. Then when I was moving into the presidency in '05, Allen was my first thought as an inaugural speaker, and he graciously agreed to do that. We kept in close touch. He's been a very, very constant source of generous advice and counsel with regard to the work here at Cairn University over the years.

Ben Best, Co-host

Well, our conversation today is focused on education and maybe more specifically around how Christians should think about education. I'd also like to delve a bit into your thoughts on the distinctives of Christian education. But if I may, if we could start the conversation here. In your estimations, how should believers think about their educational endeavors and the life of the mind?

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Well, there's two ways of answering that, as it seems to me. One is about educational endeavors. I mean, life itself is education. What is Saint Paul doing in his epistles? He's educating, he's teaching. How is the Lord addressed in the Gospels? Teacher, rabbi. It's always the matter of, can you tell us? Can you explain to us? Can you lead things out for us? The word education itself is from a Latin word, *ēducō*, to lead out, to bring out. What we do as students is to find ourselves, built up, built out, exploring, discovering all new things that we would not otherwise have been inclined to discover. For those who teach, there is an even greater task. And the New Testament makes it clear that it's, in fact, a greater responsibility, that those who teach are going to have to answer for more. What are you doing? You are taking the tender shoots, the plants in Christ's garden, and you are looking for the best way that they can be fed and nurtured and grow into full bloom that glorifies God. And that is a task, that is a goal which is sanctified in itself and sanctifies, should sanctify, those who are the practitioners of it.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

So you might say that education, considered in all these ways, is an integral part of what it is to live the life of the gospel. We are not merely people who act, we are people who think. And we are instructed to be built up by the renewing of our minds. So all of these things are connected and should be trunked into any notion of Christian education. That's even before we start talking about subjects, about theology, or about English, or about history, or whatever. What is the sense of responsibility and vocation that we bring to this matter of education? That's really the perspective I think that we have to see the whole question in.

Dr. Todd Williams

Because it is, as you say, it's integral to being a Christian. It is necessarily that we are to be engaged in learning. Jesus had many followers. He had those students that were His students in whom He invested. It is an integral part, I think, of not just the Christian faith, but the Christian life, and the Scriptures replete with references to the life of the mind and what it means to be responsible with it. So it is organically and inherently part of our Christian faith. I think that's what makes it so important in terms of what we do in Christian education, but to see it larger than that, as you're suggesting.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

You know, very typically, a few of His students flunked their final. Absolutely. But the good part was there was a make-up.

Dr. Todd Williams

That's exactly right.

Ben Best, Co-host

You've both been involved in education, certainly higher education, both Christian and non, for decades now. In that time, what, in your view, has changed the education landscape most profoundly?

Dr. Allen Guelzo

The thing that strikes me the most, that I would say is the most noticeable over these decades, has been the growth of administration and the role that administration in higher education has assumed. I can barely remember—I'm seeing this at the very end of what had been a prevailing model—in which an institution of higher learning was faculty and students, and what administration there was was almost always faculty who were doing something temporarily or part-time, but they still considered themselves to be fundamentally faculty. I can remember the old PCB days at 18th and Arch. And even the president—in those days, this was Douglas MacCorkle—Douglas MacCorkle taught. He was primarily a teacher. And my goodness, he was a wonderful teacher. And the people who filled what administrative roles there were, and there were not many, were often people who had been or who were going once again to be teachers. A lot of administration has simply been called into being by the necessities, by, let's call it, the maturation of higher education as an industry.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

An HR person who I knew years back said to me at one point, You have to realize that about 25% of tuition goes to administrative tasks, another 25% goes to compliance, another 25% goes... At the end of the day, about 25% of tuition actually goes to the educational process. And a lot of that is unavoidable, especially when you think about compliance. Todd, you have to deal with this on an everyday basis, but you have got compliance with municipal ordinances. You have compliance with public utilities. You have compliance with Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, an education office there. I don't like to think about how many trips you have to make on the turnpike to Harrisburg. And then there's federal compliance because not only do you have a Department of Education, but you also have the administration of student loans through the federal government. All of those—most of those things didn't exist.

Dr. Todd Williams

And then regional and professional accreditation programs.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Oh, and accreditation, yet again. In 1971 to 1975, those kinds of things barely existed, right? And today, they are an omnipresent demand on the life of institutions. So, yes, it is possible to say, well, isn't it a pity that now we have so many administrators? The difficulty is I'm not sure that that could be easily avoided.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Now, what has also changed along with this is a sort of balance of relationships. It used to be—I mean, my memory, certainly, is that the relationships I had with faculty were very one-on-one. Those were the people I dealt with on an everyday basis. For the experience of undergraduates today, it is much more a matter that students are dealing with administrators. Administrators understand that they have a separate role. A lot of the times, what you have is this bizarre moment where administrators and students find themselves on one side and faculty are on the other. And that is what creates, in some cases, some very toxic relations. Again, that is something that you did not see in what I want to call my day. But in a sense, I've been living with that all my life because, as one of my children once said, You never did graduate from college,

did you? I've been in it, so to speak, all these years. But these are some of the dramatic changes that I've noticed, and they apply as much to Christian higher education as to higher education in general.

Dr. Todd Williams

And that is one of the challenges because even in Christian higher education, you're still part of this larger industry that's being pushed by all of these dynamics and factors. One of the things that happens in that administrative drift or expansion that you're referencing is you also have a problem in terms of missional consistency and missional commitment. For a place like Cairn, one of the things I think that's always interesting for people to hear is how many of our administrators are still in the classroom. I'm still teaching every semester. Virtually, every senior vice president is teaching at the University in some way as well. Most of our academic administrators came from the faculty because it allows us to stay tied in a very personal way to the mission and to the students. Some of that is by necessity because we don't have the resources other institutions do to grow an administrative infrastructure. But you can't avoid the things that you're talking about. It is really something how much that has transformed the way institutions operate, and also, I think, has some impact on the kind of intellectual coherence that is part of an academic institution today.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

I think one other noticeable development connected to this is how much administrative leadership not only has not come from a classroom, but in fact, never was connected to it. Someone who is, for instance, sitting in Harrisburg, who is administering legislative mandates and inquiring about the enforcement of those mandates, is not going to think at first about what the impact of a mandate might be on Cairn as a Christian institution. They're just simply going to think, Well, this is for all the institutions. And then you begin to have the back-and-forth. And then we have the pulling in different directions. That's a moment when people are very likely to say, Why do we have so many administrators? But we have what we have because in a way, the demand has moved so much in those directions.

Ben Best, Co-host

So we can point to the regulating bodies, we can point to accreditation, we can point to the need for administrators to specialize in a particular piece of that endeavor in the industry that it upholds, all of which inevitably leads to a rise in student cost, a number of other things as a part of all of that. Apart from your direct involvement in education, you're also both deep thinkers. You both write regularly in various columns. You're both active churchmen. You're both Cairn University alumni, and you each, respectively, have a love for history. So I'm curious—to take a bit of a tangent here as we move back around—why should we be students of history?

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Because you can't avoid it. If you're going to be anyone who aspires to a biblical worldview, you're being introduced to history just from the start. Pick up the Bible. What are you being instructed in? "In the beginning." You're not being addressed in terms of, Well, who are you now? And what are you feeling? And what are you thinking and seeing? No, it's, This isn't about

you. This is about "In the beginning, God." So you might say that the Book of Genesis is a history lesson. And in fact, the first five books of the Bible are history lessons, and not only history lessons for the ancient people. What does Saint Paul say? He says, "These things were written that you might be instructed, that you might see these examples that you might..." And what does John say also in his Gospel? "These things are written so that you might believe." We're telling you a story about history. And when you understand that story, when you have embraced that history, that is integral to your believing. Believing is not merely a personal emotional response. It is a personal emotional response, but it is a response wrapped around historical fact, a historical Jesus, historical disciples, a historical gospel message.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

When you look at it in that respect, yes, the Bible itself is directing us to a history that we should embrace. The great thing is we can embrace that, and that becomes our history as well. One of the things that I think is particularly gratifying in the study of Christian history, in particular, is that what are you doing? You're discovering family. All right, the family who aren't actually here anymore. But we know that that is actually a comparatively minor detail, that even if they're not here physically, they are a cloud of witnesses. All right, that's a cloud of witnesses from time past. We learn from them. We also owe them something. We owe them fidelity. And understanding and embracing that, which we often think of as being a spiritual exercise, is also a historical exercise. So I can't disentangle the historical elements from the biblical and theological elements. They're simply rooted right there in a biblical faith.

Dr. Todd Williams

And apart from that, we find ourselves sort of in danger of a kind of contemporary arrogance, personal arrogance. To be ahistorical is to necessarily be arrogant because history is an act of setting yourself aside in a way that is really profound. I think that's one of the things that makes it difficult in today's culture, where we're all told that we're truth-makers, and history is a tool of activism rather than seeking truth. We're truth-seekers, not truth-makers. All of those things lead to a greater degree of humility, a more robust perspective, as you say, a more theologically integrated outlook. There's a lot that comes with appreciating and studying history in that way.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

A great man, and you will recognize this at once, Todd, deplored what he called "chronological snobbery."

Ben Best, Co-host

I was just thinking the same thing.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Chronological snobbery simply is the notion that we, sitting right here at this particular moment in time, 2023 A.D., occupy a position that is unique and privileged and which does not need to be rooted in anything that went before. And if that is the case, then we really have set the Bible itself at naught, because that is an attitude that marches in exactly the different direction from what we read in the Bible.

Dr. Todd Williams

I think that's exactly true. I think in the same way we open with understanding that education, learning, teaching is all intertwined with our being Christians, so is that respect for history and a degree of humility and curiosity.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

What's, I think, very interesting in the way we approach biblical history is that biblical history doesn't gussy anything up. No, biblical history is brutally frank. Raw. There are people in there that you scratch your head about. There is David and Uriah the Hittite and Bathsheba. There is Abraham and Sarah. They don't always behave like saints. In one sense, all right, there's a comfort there because we know when we falter, all right. Righteous man falls seven times in a day and is picked up. But we also look at the history of great people like that, and we realize they are great not because they were intrinsically perfect and always did everything right. They were great because of God's mercy, God's calling to them, God's grace. We learn a lesson about grace. We learn a lesson about fallenness. We learn a lesson about irony. We learn a lesson about how "God writes straight on crooked lines," which was a proverb I first read when I was in the old PCB days and which has stuck with me ever since.

Dr. Todd Williams

Yes.

Ben Best, Co-host

In thinking about your own educational journeys, what aspects of history have been most intriguing to you and why? Dr. Williams, I know you have an appreciation of civics, American history. Dr. Guelzo, you've written extensively on Lincoln and a book on Robert E. Lee. You've written in and around the Civil War and a proclivity in that specific era. But what, as you look back, is formative in both your educational journeys and what aspects of history have been most intriguing? What do you run back to?

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Well, the funny thing is, Ben, I never set out to be a historian. I never planned to be. Now, I always had a very lively interest in the subject, and it goes back to, oh, my goodness, when I was a child, I was interested in history. But I never saw myself becoming a historian.

Dr. Todd Williams

I think that is a fairly common narrative for a lot of folks, particularly for a lot of our graduates who may have come to this institution thinking they were going to be preparing for ministry or simply studying theology and Bible and then end up having their interests broaden and actually bring that biblical and theological perspective to bear on a particular discipline. I think that was my case. I think that for me, the issue of history has always been, and of course, Allen in his work has had an influence on my thinking around this in the last 30 years or so that he's been working and writing and others as well. But I've always been someone who contextualizes, constantly contextualizing. There's no way to contextualize that doesn't include history. If history

is prologued, then that is the way you contextualize something. I think the testimony of so many graduates over the years—sort of a similar thing, I ended up at Temple University with no formal background in psychological studies. It was the same. I had the exact same experience there entering graduate programs. I hear it over and over again from our folks, and yet they had a great experience.

Dr. Todd Williams

They were probably a few steps ahead, even though they hadn't actually studied in a specific discipline. Because one of the things that a theologically and biblically integrated education does for you is you learn to deal with text and people very well. You learn to think in an integrated fashion. You learn to think contextually, which I would think would serve you very well in the field of history and for me in terms of social theory. I think that is one of the things going back to where we started, that it's organic to who we are as Christians, which prepares us for those kinds of things. Those opportunities come, as you say, and we take them.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

You have learned to think about why you think. You have acquired epistemological self-awareness. There's a big technical term, but all right, I think that really describes it.

Dr. Todd Williams

Any exercise where you're doing anything hermeneutical forces a level of intellectual responsibility and carefulness that serves well in virtually any discipline. To one of your points, Ben, on the question was also not just our interest in history, but specific areas. Allen, you've shared with me personally what it is about the 19th century, in particular, the Civil War, and specifically Lincoln, and what it is about that that inspires your interest here. I think that's probably worth people hearing, because I think it sort of illustrates that it's not a single point in time that you like the weaponry of that particular era or you like the geographic. There's something larger in terms of your interest in that.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Well, the interest in the Civil War, in Lincoln is a very long-standing one. I was a child of the Civil War centennial years, and it was very normal that way to have an interest in that subject. I found myself interested in Lincoln because, quite literally, I pestered my grandmother for a comic book biography of Abraham Lincoln, which I still have. But I pestered her for it at a news agency in the old Philadelphia 30th Street Station. And that set me on a path that eventually led toward writing a great deal about Lincoln. So there's a long-term connection that way. But there's also the connection of seeing in Lincoln and Lincoln's time, some really remarkable things about American life itself. We, as a democracy, are committed in our bones to equality as a principle. That was right there in the Declaration of Independence. However, as one very astute observer of American life in the 19th century wrote, the passion for equality can have the negative result of discouraging excellence. You see this in a lot of 19th-century politics, because look at the run of presidents that we had in the years before the Civil War. My goodness, some of the most unmemorable people in American life.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

You run the line from Zachary Taylor, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan. When was the last time anyone celebrated the birthday of Franklin Pierce? And you think at this moment, as we were descending further and further into what would become the chaos of the Civil War, what was going to happen? If the leadership dearth had been so dramatic up to that point, what hope did we have? And then suddenly, there comes this man, Lincoln. And he is almost literally a gift. It was like, what good thing did we do to deserve Abraham Lincoln? And yet even that, he was not perceived as being that at the beginning. After his election, one newspaper editor asked in irritation, Who will write this ignorant man's state papers for him? Oh, I wonder if the editor ever had to eat those words. But this was the perception. You just cannot think of what would have happened to this country had it not had the kind of leadership that Lincoln provided. At moments like that, it just seems marvelous. It just seems wonderful without any precedent or warmup. Suddenly, at the moment when we needed it the most, we get an Abraham Lincoln.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Otto von Bismarck, who I don't usually quote as an authority, once said that "The Lord looks out for fools, drunks, and the United States of America." And if there was ever a confirmation of that, I would have to say that it's in the person of Abraham Lincoln.

Dr. Todd Williams

And I think in that, and what I've always enjoyed about your work around that as well, is talking about it in that way, where you understand the very robust narrative and context of Lincoln and his time in a way that there is something to learn from it. And I think that is actually one of the things that I've appreciated the most about reading during that time frame, which is one of my favorites, or the founding, which again, we're teaching on that now in the civics class that I teach. But also even in points of ancient history or the 20th century with the Second World War, those pivotal moments in history where there is something profound to learn from the characters there. I find myself, and I tell folks this all the time with regard to everybody wants to know, what are executives reading and what should I read? I'm reading, apart from biblical and theological works that are germane to what I'm thinking about or doing, almost exclusively histories and biographies. And I don't really spend much time on anything else. Some fiction here or there, but for the most part, the things that I learn the most from are these histories and biographies because of what we learn from the lives of those that went before us and the events that preceded us.

Dr. Todd Williams

There's a lot there to be gleaned. And from the big moments, I think things stand out in very stark ways. Lincoln in the Civil War is certainly one of those for me. I have found Allen's work to be extremely helpful in that way. And usually when we get together, we're talking about some book or other that we're reading.

Dr. Allen Guelzo



I'm looking up at your book shelves here, Todd. The first thing that takes my eye are two volumes of biography of Churchill. There's another biography of Lincoln. It was once said by Logan Pearsall Smith that the mark—the genuine mark of a vocation, not just a job—the genuine mark of a vocation, of a calling, was how much love you had for the drudgery of it. Lincoln had the love for the drudgery. He would be doing that kind of work at all hours of the day and night. And one of his secretaries was really amazed by the fact that the day after his re-election in 1864, well, everyone had been out celebrating that night. No one else was in the White House the next day. But this man came in because it was his job to bring the mail in. He brought the mail into a suite of offices then in the White House that were the president's office. He was amazed to see Lincoln at his desk. And this man reflected on that and said how much comfort it gave him to realize that the fate of the nation was in the hands of a man who would not rest from the responsibility of oversight.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

I think, and people sometimes ask me, what do you think is the most marvelous thing Lincoln ever wrote? And people will say, of course, the Gettysburg address, the second inaugural. I like to take them to a letter that he wrote in July of 1862, to a man in Louisiana named Cuthbert Bullit. This was a man who was complaining to Lincoln about union policies in occupied Louisiana. Lincoln told him pretty bluntly what the reason for the policies was. But at the end, he said, "I shall do nothing in malice. What we are dealing with is too great for malicious dealing." And I thought, that is marvelous. Because not only does it speak a word of balance and peace to others, but it also reminds us, we are only servants.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

When I was a senior at PCB, Haddon Robinson came and preached a series that spring and over and across the street in the old Arch Street Presbyterian Church. I have no idea how many of my peers may remember this, but I was struck so forcibly by the text he chose to preach on from the Gospel of Luke: "When we have done everything that we are called to do, we must say, 'We are only servants; we've only done that which we were supposed to do.'" You don't pay yourself a compliment. You don't pat yourself on the back. You just realize, this is what I'm supposed to do. And when you see an attitude like that in the hands of a man like Lincoln, then you think, I want to aspire to that, I want to practice that.

Dr. Todd Williams

And that issue of looking at those kinds of characters and aspiring is not something that applies only to those that want to serve in the public square. They are things that can be gleaned by everyone, no matter what their station or occupation. And therein, I think, lies the value of history and biography, where as it's sort of to the degree to which popular culture and other things in our current day are making that less of an emphasis or consider it less important in grade school, middle school, high school curriculum. We're losing something, not just in terms of our knowledge of the past, we're losing the opportunities for inspiration and aspiration because we're not looking at those kinds of things. They have impact on every aspect of our life. My wife and I, a number of years ago, someone asked a question about, we got to this point in our marriage, we want to be challenged to think about it in a different way. We both said, what you

need to do is read about John and Abigail Adams. If you read about John and Abigail Adams, and you're looking for what you can glean from the way they loved and cared for one another in the midst of an extremely critical time in history, where they were under a great deal of pressure and suffering and the things that come out in their love for one another, their respect for one another, their relationship with one another. There's something to be gleaned from that. That's not learning about Abigail Adams, the first lady of the second president, or John Adams, the second president, but actually learning something about the way in which their life worked and how you glean from that. That's what a vibrant reading of history does for you.

Ben Best, Co-host

Tying us back to the state of Christian higher ed and Christian education in general, and how we as believers have the ability to use history and interact as students of history to engage our culture. There's substantial pushback from both secular and Christian segments regarding the waning value of a college or university education. How would both of you encourage students, encourage parents and pastors and teachers to consider the lasting value of education? Then maybe as an addendum, consider the lasting value of a distinctly Christian education.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

How much time is consumed by charging a battery for a car? Do you regard that as a waste?

Ben Best, Co-host

Not in the least.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

No, because the battery is what's going to make the car run for as long as you need to have it run. A college education is like charging a battery, and the charge that you take can last you your whole life. It can be a life which is informed by inquiries of various sorts. It can be a life informed by poetry you have read and learned. I remember—granted, the teaching of English and poetry was not what I would have regarded as a priority at the old PCB—yet I remember very, very fondly, Mrs. Carol Fink, who taught a number of English courses. I loved that distinguished lady. She was remarkable. And I've come away over the years still remembering over and over again the poetry I encountered in her courses. And it's just become a part of me. I took quite a charge from my battery from that. And I think that what I would say to parents today is this unique four years at this unique moment in a person's life, when they're making this indefinable transition from childhood to adulthood, they are now more than a child, but they're not quite an adult.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

This incredibly formative and plastic moment of their lives. When that can be filled with that charge, it is like filling up the battery that they will run on for the rest of their lives. And I'm a testimony myself to how many different kinds of charge I took, even from Mrs. Fink and what I learned from her in English courses, which, of course, we're not supposed to... I think some people were actually rather impatient that they had to take it. Why do I have to take this English course? I'm doing this other thing. I'm I'm doing Christian ed, or I'm doing something like that.

And that was entirely the wrong way to look at it. That, yes, there's a vocational aspect to education that in some ways has always been. But much more than that, what happens in a college and university education has to be the preparing of a soul, has to be the preparing of a mind. And you'll only get one chance, really. You only get one chance to do it. And you got to fill it up fully as much as you can. And my word to parents is, see education in exactly that way.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Parents do such remarkable things for their offspring and their raising of them. One of the best things they can do for their raising of them is to make available that time, that window, in which to be formed and shaped by that which is honorable, by that which is true, by that which is beautiful. What does the Apostle Paul say? Saint Paul says, "Think on these things." Not just give them a thought every now and again. Be preoccupied by them, meditate upon them. And these four years are the opportunity to do that and begin the patterns of that. That will last for a lifetime.

Dr. Todd Williams

And for parents to see that and to be intentional about instilling that perspective in their children is important because in the day in which we live, you have this weird convergence of things that actually work against that—this sort of preoccupation with utilitarian. If it doesn't serve some economic end, it isn't worthwhile, it isn't necessary. You also have the other side of it, which is a kind of overindulgent culture that works only on preferences. So if a student doesn't like schooling, therefore, education doesn't have any value for them. I think the idea of saying, no, look, this is a formative time, as you so eloquently described, where there is much that can be done that will benefit someone for the rest of their life. Let's be intentional in instilling in our young people to make the most of that time because it is not... And what you're doing is actually creating, hopefully, instilling this commitment to cultivate the life of the mind for the rest of your life. But you'll never be free from the kinds of obligations that come with parenting and employment and other kinds of things that will allow you the time that you have here.

Dr. Todd Williams

Students so easily take that for granted. It's why so many of our older students, non-traditional students, walk in and they refuse to take it for granted because they've actually crept down that path of life and say, Now, hold on a second, if you don't find value in these things... And so to fight back against the... As you said, vocation has always been a part of it. We want to make students ready for the marketplace. But if we only see it as utilitarian, and we only are catering to the preferences of individuals. They only do what they like to do. Neither one of those is really being intentional as a parent and thinking about the larger impact that can be had in someone's life by having a different perspective on education.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Let's be theological about this. God is not a job. God is not an income. God is beauty. When Jonathan Edwards wrote about the Trinity, he described the relationship between the persons of the Trinity as a relation of beauty. Contemplate that. What goes on within the Godhead is the enjoyment of beauty. And we poor limited human creatures, we get to taste a bit of that. And we

get to look out the window and we get to see the cherry tree now as it's blooming in spring. And we get to reflect on words of beauty. "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now is hung with bloom along the bough, and stands along the woodland ride, wearing white for Eastertide." When you fill up a soul with that, there's no room in that soul for cheapness, lies, and evil.

Ben Best, Co-host

Dr. Guelzo, you wrote an article a couple of years back recounting a story in which, as a young grad student, you met Dr. Cornelius Van Til, a noted philosopher and theologian in the tradition of Warfield and Bavinck. His teachings greatly influence the likes of R.J. Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, and Francis Schaeffer, and others. In the article, you wrote of sitting on a porch and asking Dr. Van Til, why did he decide to devote his life to the study of philosophy and the teaching of apologetics? In that article, his answer floored you. Could you tell us why?

Dr. Allen Guelzo

I went to pay this visit on Dr. Van Til. I had read his works. I had, I have to admit, had difficulty reading his works. You have to go slowly. They are profound. But I wanted to meet the man. I went to his home in Cheltenham. He met me, as he often met students who came to call, on the porch with a rake in his hand. I was going to rake the leaves first before I would be admitted to his inner sanctum. Very gently done, of course, but still, all right, that's fine. Price of admission. Got in and talked to him, and I, in my cocky way as a graduate student, was thinking, This is going to be a real exercise in profundity. We're going to use so many big words, it'll make a dictionary's heart fail. And I asked him the question, Why did you get involved? Why did you commit yourself to this career in writing apologetics, in writing books about the philosophy of religion? And I was really expecting—I was sitting there grinning from ear to ear, waiting for this great philosophical outpouring that I could catch in my hat and take with me and show off.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Dr. Van Til, white haired Dr. Van Til, son of a Dutch dairy farmer, sat there and said without missing a beat or batting an eye, "Why? To protect Christ's little ones." I could have cried because for one thing, as soon as he said it, you knew exactly that he was right. That's what he was doing. And you also felt the rebuke of your own arrogance. That you thought like the theological student Luther described once, you thought you were going to shine in the profundity of your wisdom. Moments like that, Luther said, The student needs to reach back and feel his ears, because there he will find growing a long, silky pair of donkey ears. That's what I felt like. And I deserved to feel like that. And I have reminded myself always of what Dr. Van Til said, What is your task? Several weeks ago in church, the children's choir sang an anthem. It was an arrangement using the tune from the slow movement of Dvořák's Ninth Symphony, the famous "Goin' Home" tune. But the words were, "Who will feed God's lambs?" And hearing these children's voices sing this, hearing these words, I'm sorry, the handkerchief came out.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

And I'm glad it did. I'm glad there was something there to be moved by it. But it reminded me, what are you doing? You are protecting. You are sheltering something immensely precious, Christ's little ones. When you think of little ones, you're thinking not just of little children, but

you're also thinking of all those who are plain and simple of heart, those whose minds and affections lie just on the surface without complications. Think of people who have been wounded by life, who have been deserted, who have been wronged. Those are the little ones. And the calling of the scholar, no less than the pastor, is the protection of Christ's little ones. That means that you observe every word you say, you judge every word you say. Is this protecting? Is this building the fence? Am I the shepherd who lies down in the gate and would give up his life for the sheep? Weigh everything you write, weigh everything you say. Will this build up? Will this cultivate? Will this protect? That is a constant reminder to me, and always Dr. Van Til's words, come back to me. What are you protecting? You are protecting Christ's little ones.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

You've been given a charge. All right, maybe not a pastoral charge in the formal sense. But even as a historian, even as a teacher in a classroom, you have been given a charge to protect. That simple response of Van Til's has been with me ever since and always will be.

Ben Best, Co-host

If you'll indulge me in the next question in the article I'm referencing, you wrote this: "When we no longer make ourselves the center of our desires. When we take our aim as Christian scholars, as college presidents, pastors, thinkers, to make perfect our wills, then and only then do I imagine that we will have any real effect on the world. Only when we have surrendered the notion of having an effect, will we, in fact, have one? And only then will we begin to see that our real priority is not to change the world, to change our professions, to publish this or footnote that, but to protect Christ's little ones." Let me ask, in 2023, given what we've talked about at this point of our history, at this current culture that we exist in, do you see an increased responsibility of the church, of pastors, certainly of parents and educators to guard Christ's little ones?

Dr. Allen Guelzo

I wouldn't say increased because I don't think it's ever been less. The words "make perfect your will" are borrowed from T.S. Eliot, from the "Choruses from the 'Rock'" and from *Murder in the Cathedral*, two pieces which I encountered for the first time at PCB. I still have this volume of Eliot's writings, and I've come back to them over and over again, and especially that injunction, "make perfect your will." In other words, decide the one thing that is needful, the one thing that must be done at all costs at any price. Understand what that thing is and surrender yourself to the doing of it. And whatever is asked of you, whatever opprobrium people heap upon you for doing it. It must bounce right off. You must "make perfect your will" not to be disturbed from that goal, always to keep that in view, not to faint, not to fail in the pursuit of it. Decide that you are going to be that servant of Christ, and live that out and carry that out. "Make perfect your will." And you may be asked to pay the price. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Thomas Becket must pay the price.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

In the "Choruses from the 'Rock,'" which are a tremendous commentary on 20th-century culture. "Make perfect your will." Do not be distracted. Do not allow the values of everyone around you,

in pursuit, as Eliot put it, of a thousand lost golf balls, do not permit that to be a distraction. Where is your focus? "Make perfect your will." When we do that, we recognize that it's not our wills, it's not our standing, it's not our status. It's only when we shed those things and the pursuit of those things, in fact, we really will have that impact.

Dr. Todd Williams

That kind of singular focus and singular vision is essential to Christian education's thriving because the distractions, the narcissism, the mission drift, the desire to be relevant, the desire to be on board, all of those things are the kinds of distractions.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Which I think is the most poisonous and toxic desire, the desire for respectability. The desire to walk through the marketplace and have everyone compliment you. And then you remember the rebuke of the Gospels. When men will praise you, what are they doing different from what they did for the false prophets? Then the condemnation comes into you, and then you hear the words of Nathan, the prophet, "Thou art the man." What a moment. That was—what a moment of condemnation. David is just going along with it. Nathan is saying, Oh, this is like the man with a little ewe lamb. Isn't that terrible? "Oh, yes," David says, "Terrible. That man should be dreadfully punished." "Thou art the man." Yeah, but that is not the word we want to hear. The word we want to hear is: "Well done, good and faithful servant." What is required of a steward. I mean, this is what the Gospels, this is what the New Testament asks us. What is required of a steward? That he win a Pulitzer Prize? That he be entertained at the White House? That he have a nationally syndicated cable network show? No, I don't recollect any of that in the New Testament, sorry.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

It is required of a steward that he be found faithful. "Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might." And if it's writing books about history, do them as though the whole world depended upon it. If it's brick laying, do it as though the whole world depended upon it, because I always remember that line from that wonderful movie, Chariots of Fire: "You can peel a spud to the glory of God if you peel it to perfection." "Make perfect your will."

Ben Best, Co-host

To you both, as we wrap up our discussion, maybe the point of this entire conversation could be summed up in this question: How does thinking wisely and biblically about history and about education help Christians to better serve the church and to serve our culture?

Dr. Allen Guelzo

To think in that way is to think as a servant. And thinking as servants is something which has become very foreign, not only to the way we behave in our culture, but even the way we behave in the church. We sometimes ask this question, what are the marks of the church? I remember a very astute friend of mine, Darryl Hart, wrote many years ago an article in which he said, "You know what the true marks of the church are for the modern church? An uplifting sermon, fast-paced music, and lots of parking." And I thought, Oh, 'tis true, 'tis true. If we are servants, if

we learn to be servants, if we learn, first of all, to be servants of what has been revealed, that's where Christian education begins. If we learn in that process to serve each other, and in serving each other, I mean, not just adopting a kind of obsequious attitude. Sometimes serving each other is, not to put too fine a point on it, putting up with people. That doesn't sound very elegant, but it's true. When Jesus girded himself around and took the towel and proceeded to wipe their feet, of course, Peter was the one who was objecting.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

What was the Lord trying to teach him? That even despite what you're saying, I am still going to serve you. Yeah, we put up with people. Sometimes we lead people who don't want to be led. Sometimes we teach people who don't want to be taught. Sometimes we try to illumine people who don't seem to have much interest in illumination. We don't do it because we're going to get a grade for it. We do it because we must do it, because we're called to do it. That's real servant. That's the servant who educates. And developing that patience and that humility, that's a long-term process. And Todd will be the first to tell you that I am not there. I know I'm not, all right? And people haven't been shy about reminding me of that. And I have to say to all of them, thank you for reminding me of that. It's good to know.

Dr. Todd Williams

But the desire to exercise a perspective that is wise and careful and humble and right, I think, as we pointed out, just in terms of historical figures, they're flawed, they fail, they make mistakes. The issue is, are we living intentionally with regard to that? Are we seeking to do the best that we can, as you were stating in reference to the Eliot quotes? The idea that we would take seriously the work that we've been given to do and to be willing to set aside our own egos and accomplishments and achievements and be poured out as a drink offering in the work that we've been given to do is an important perspective, and I think one that we need. I think that we are, as we always are as Christians, swimming against the tide with regard to those values and sensibilities, but they are no less our obligation because of that. And we have to be persistent.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

A tide of self-advertisement, a tide of self-seeking, a tide of narcissism, a tide of arrogance. And the temptation is always to take a dip from all those and drink it ourselves. That's what we have to fight against. So I come back to the words that Haddon Robinson preached on those many years ago. At the end of the day, we can only say that we have been servants. We have only done that which it was our duty to do.

Ben Best, Co-host

Fantastic place to end our conversation. Dr. Williams, Dr. Guelzo, I am grateful for your time and your dedication to wise and winsome thinking, excellence in scholarship and leadership, and for making much of Christ by faithfully endeavoring to guard His little ones. Thank you for your time.

Dr. Allen Guelzo

Thank you.